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## ABSTRACT

This report discusses preliminary results from a project designed to develop and test a practical approach to the identification of, and intervention with, students who have, or are at risk, for emotional and behavioral disorders. The study includes data from 28 elementary students with behavioral problems that concerned the classroom teachers. In a training program in functional assessment and intervention called "Individualized Positive Support" (IPS), teachers learned basic functional assessment methods and developed hypotheses and competing behavioral analyses. They also learned how to use the information from the functional assessment to develop and use positive, individualized interventions. The report focuses on the change in discipline referral rates for eight students who had discipline referrals and for whom functional assessment led to individualized, positive results. Seven of the eight students decreased their referral rates after their teachers participated in IPS. One student, who had not been referred for discipline problems before the IPS training, was sent to the principal's office after the IPS training. Of the seven who decreased their referral rates, six had zero referrals during the follow-up period of two to six months. Specific outcomes for each of these students is described. (Contains 32 references.)

(CR)

## Can Discipline Referrals Be Reduced by Functional Behavioral Assessment

Tary Tobin and Emma Martin

Paper presented at the  
Annual Meeting of the Council for Exceptional Children  
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# Can Discipline Referrals Be Reduced by Functional Behavioral Assessments?

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Poster Presentation, Council for Exceptional Children Conference, Kansas City, MO, April, 2001

This report covers one aspect of a larger research project, "Using Teamwork to Plan Systematic and Functional Environments for Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders" (Grant #H324N980024, U.S. Department of Education, no official endorsement should be assumed). The goal of this project is to develop and test a practical approach to the identification of, and intervention with, students who have, or are at risk, for emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). The project has come to be called *Individual Effective Behavior Support (IEBS)* because it is based on the concept of the Individual System within Effective Behavior Support (EBS) (Lewis & Sugai, 1999; Lewis, Sugai, & Colvin, 1998; Smith & Sugai, 2000; Sprague, Sugai, & Walker, 1998; Sugai, 1996; Sugai & Horner, 1999; Sugai, Lewis-Palmer, & Hagan, 1998; Todd, Horner, Sugai, & Colvin, 1999; Todd, Horner, Sugai, & Sprague, 1999).

The study started in the Fall of 1998 and will continue through the Summer of 2001. The setting is the Northwestern part of the U.S. Six schools were involved and all served students at the elementary level. Five schools were in one district in a medium sized city and one was in a rural district. The current report includes data for the 28 students in the city district whose teachers (or their educational assistants) participated during the second or third year of the project and whose parents had given permissions for participation in the project. There were 24 males and 4 females. More than half of the students (57%, or 16) were in the primary grades (K – 3), with nine students being in Grade 1. Most of the students did not have any discipline referrals (i.e., no record of having been sent to the school administrator for discipline due to a behavior problem) although they did have behavior problems that concerned the classroom teachers.

The independent variable was a training program for elementary school teachers and educational assistants in functional assessment and intervention, called *Individualized Positive Support (IPS)*. Participating school staff earned continuing education credits for attending IPS classes every week for one hour after school. The first two years of the project, training was held Winter and Spring terms. The third year, the training was (a) streamlined, condensed, and provided at a faster pace; (b) provided Fall term; and (c) expanded to include a parent component (Tobin & von Ravensberg, 2001). The specific form the instruction took evolved throughout the project, in part due to interest in the many new materials being developed for staff development in this area and in part in response to what we were learning about the needs and interests of participating school staff. Throughout the project, many resources were tapped, including both print (e.g., Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice, 1998; Fad, Patton, & Polloway, 2000; Hall & Hall, 1998a, 1998b; O'Neill et al., 1997; Rolinder & Axelrod, 2000; Tobin, 1994; Witt, Daly, & Noell, 2000) and digital formats, such as, cd-roms (Liaupsin, Scott, & Nelson, 2000), software programs (Hofmeister et al., 1999), and Web sites (e.g., <http://brt.uoregon.edu/ebs>, <http://pbis.org>, <http://www.air-dc.org/cecp/fba/default.htm>). However,

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the content remained essentially the same. Teachers learned basic functional assessment methods: (a) gathering information by interviewing students, parents, and school staff, and by reviewing school records or filling out rating scales; (b) direct observations of behavioral sequences, and (c) developing hypotheses and competing behavior analyses. Second, they learned how to use the information from the functional assessment to develop and use positive, individualized interventions.

As a result of the IPS project, a model for in-service training for classroom teachers and educational assistants developed which includes providing materials and professional development and/or college credit for participation. Trainees are asked to (a) study print and/or digital materials related to functional assessment and intervention, (b) identify a particular student for whom they will conduct a functional assessment and develop a positive, individualized behavior plan based on the functional assessment (or work with others to do this), (c) complete a Competing Behaviors Analysis, including brainstorming related, potential interventions (O'Neill et al., 1997, Appendix G), (d) participate in team-style meetings led by a behavior specialist and including fellow school staff members, usually about six people, who also are involved in the training), and (e) develop, try out, and report back on the results of a specific behavior support plan based the functional assessment. Participants sit in a circle or around a table to facilitate discussion. The typical format for the hour long meetings is (a) a quick check around the group to see if anyone has a pressing concern or something they want to share, (b) a brief (about 15 to 25 minutes) verbal explanation of new content (which is also provided in print and/or digital form) with an opportunity for questions, discussion, or illustration of how to use new materials or of how to do the expected assignments, and, (c) time for more detailed discussion of their efforts and experiences by participants who want to talk and are interested in listening to other's suggestions. In addition, participants who provided the functional assessment information needed for the Functional Assessment Intervention Program (FAIP) (Hoffmeister et al., 1999), were given a print-out of the summary and recommended, function-based strategies generated by that software program.

**Discipline referrals were an important dependent variable.** The first year of the project, the schools involved all depended on a paper management system to document discipline referrals. Computer-generated charts were prepared from discipline referral data. Chart templates and directions for using and interpreting the charts of discipline referrals were developed in the first year of the project (Tobin, 1999). Each school received copies of these directions along with their charts, a manuscript of an article on how to use this type of information in planning interventions (Tobin, Sugai, & Colvin, 2000), and consultation regarding their use, as needed, on an on-going basis. The charts illustrated aspects such as, (a) monthly rate per day per 100 students; (b) types of infractions; (c) types of consequences (e.g., suspension, detention); (c) percentages of the student body receiving zero, one, and repeated referrals; and (d) students with the highest number of referrals. These charts were well received by school administrators and other staff members. EBS teams studied the charts and made plans to share key information with the entire faculty.

In the second and third years of the project, the schools started to use the School-Wide Information System (SWIS) (May et al., 2000), a computerized program for recording and charting discipline referral data. When school staff began to use SWIS, and to generate their own SWIS charts, they understood how these charts could be used in the identification of students who were at risk for school failure and likely candidates for functional assessment and positive

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support. In addition, in cases where a behavior plan for an individual student already was in place, staff were trained in the use of data now readily generated by SWIS individual student reports to supplement other types of data in making decisions.

The remainder of the current report will focus on the **change in discipline referral rates** (number of referrals divided by number of days per phase) for eight students who had discipline referrals and for whom functional assessment led to individualized, positive interventions (see Figure 1). The phases were (a) before the teachers' in-service and (b) after the teachers' in-service training. Seven of the eight students decreased their referral rates after their teachers participated in IPS. One student, who had not been referred for discipline problems before the IPS training, was sent to the principal's office after the IPS training. Of the seven who decreased their referral rates, six had zero referrals during the follow-up period for this study, which, at the time of this writing, ranged from two to six months (depending on which school year the teacher participated in the training). The current report presents preliminary results as the project is still continuing. In the following sections, a description of events is provided for each of the eight students with discipline referrals, using code numbers instead of names to protect confidentiality. The students are presented in the order listed in the legend of Figure 1.

**Student 1.** Student 1 was selected two years in a row for functional assessments. In fourth grade, his teacher was alarmed by his defiant attitude, especially when he refused to work on his assignments and refused to follow directions to go to the principal's office. One time he caused a major classroom disruption by "going limp" (like a protestor) when two male staff members came removed him by force. Fortunately, he responded well to the function-based support the teacher tried as a part of the IPS project. Her interventions included making assignments less aversive by offering choices and making following directions less aversive by (a) improving the teacher-student relationship, which the teacher decided to do by finding opportunities to talk with the student in a pleasant way about topics other than his school work and (b) using the "Attention Training System" (ATS) (Gordon Systems, 1987; Polaha & Allen, 2000) and other behavioral interventions. ATS is a battery operated module that displays points being earned (per minute or per 4 minutes) when on-task. When an agreed upon number of points is earned, the student will be able to do something special that he and the teacher have planned, such as, play an educational computer game for 5 minutes. If the student is off-task, the teacher can use a remote control to subtract a point and send a visual but silent signal to the student to get back on task. Although Student 1 made progress in fourth grade, the next year, his fifth grade teacher felt that, even though discipline referrals were not a problem, the student continued to need function-based support due to disruptive behaviors that were minor yet occurring too frequently. The fifth grade teacher conducted another functional assessment and decided that the student's situation was different. He no longer was refusing to work or follow directions. However, he was talking out too often, apparently in order to gain the teacher's attention, even if that attention involved being asked not to talk out. The fifth grade teacher's function-based support included (a) withholding attention immediately after talk outs; (b) increasing positive attention at other times, especially when the student was on-task (including attention in the form of teacher proximity and nonverbal communication such as eye contact and smiles) and taking time to chat with the student about topics of interest after school or at recess and (c) reminders of the expected behavior given before class.

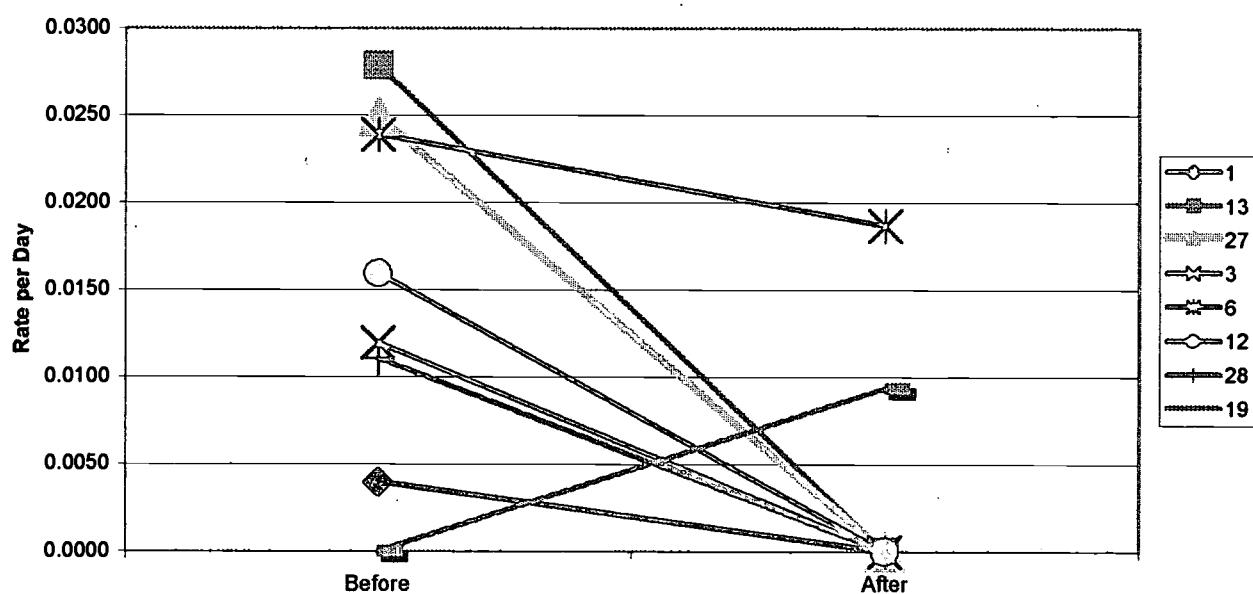
**Student 13.** An Educational Assistant who worked with Student 13 participated in the IPS in-service training. His discipline referrals often were for defiance or disruption when he was

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in Grade 2. The functional assessment indicated two main behavior problems, with different functions. First, he ignored directions to change activities when involved in a preferred activity. In this way, he often managed to continue with the preferred task even though he was disrupting the classroom schedule. Second, it was predictable that he would be defiant with substitute teachers and that this would be followed by both peer and adult attention. Function-based support for the first problem was to teach the student to ask if he could finish his preferred activity at recess and to provide praise for asking and for stopping when told to do so. In addition, if he did not follow directions, he lost the next opportunity to engage in the preferred activity. For the second problem, he was given a special "helper" position in which he was able to help the substitute. School staff worked together and with substitutes in advance to plan (a) how to teach him something he could do that would be helpful to a substitute and (b) how the substitute could reinforce the student's appropriate behavior. Although these classroom interventions were effective in achieving their purposes and in reducing the student's rate of discipline referrals, he is now having some other behavior problems on the playground (e.g., unsafe, touching others). So far, these behaviors are relatively minor and have resulted in warnings, not discipline referrals. However, it suggests that a functional assessment of the playground situation is in order.

**Figure 1. Change in Discipline Referrals for 8 Students After Teacher Studies  
Functional Assessment and Intervention**



Student 27. An Educational Assistant who worked with Student 27 participated in the IPS in-service training. Although the EA did not complete the entire IPS program, she completed a functional assessment which included (a) direct observations in five settings, (b) interviews with three school staff members and with the student (using questions from O'Neill et al., 1997), (c) a summary statement and competing behaviors analysis, and (d) suggested strategies (e.g., shorten, breakdown, or modify assignments; keep distracting things away; be sure you have the

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student's attention before giving a direction; provide opportunities to earn activities such as being able to film an assembly or be involved in school dramas). Student 27 was in Grade 5 at the time the functional assessment was conducted and he received one discipline for fighting on the playground during the IPS in-service training. However, he has not received any discipline referrals since then (none for the last five months). In the past, his discipline referrals were usually for noncompliance with directions to work in the classroom and that is the behavior that was addressed in the functional assessment.

Student 3. Student 3 was in the fifth grade when his teacher participated in the IPS program. This teacher's previous favorite method of discipline was to tell students to write a certain number of sentences, as a punishment. At the beginning of the IPS training, she said that Student 3 "owed" her hundreds of sentences. She was looking for something more effective. The teacher conducted, by herself, a functional assessment which included (a) the Functional Assessment Classroom Rating Scale (Tobin, 1994, 2001), (b) a student interview, and (c) a competing behaviors analysis from O'Neill et al. (1997). The behavior support plan the teacher developed was based on her reading of Witt, Daly, & Noell (2000), which is a guide to functional assessment and intervention designed for school counselors and psychologists yet appealing to many teachers as well. The student's primary behavior problem was being disruptive (talking out, out of seat) in class and it was maintained by both peer and teacher attention. The teacher designed a multi-component intervention that included (a) antecedent manipulations: reminders of expectations before transitions, extra assignments that would be particularly interesting to this student (e.g., asking him to work on writing up a plan for a skit or a comedy routine if he finished his regular work early), moving him away from peers most likely to engage in inappropriate talk with him during class; (b) have the school counselor teach the student some things that he could do to gain attention appropriately and practice with him (e.g., prepare a demonstration, take lunch count); (c) provide opportunities for the student to earn praise, privileges, or other reinforcers by appropriate behavior. This teacher also used the Attention Training System sometimes as a part of her intervention. Although Student 3's classroom behavior improved and he has not received any discipline referrals since the IPS program, he did receive 2 warnings for rudeness on the playground during the IPS training. As with Students 13 and 27, it appears that a classroom intervention will not necessarily affect a playground situation.

Student 6. Student 6, a fourth grader, had been identified as "Emotionally Disturbed" and his teacher reported that participating in the IPS program was very helpful when it was time to revise the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP). This student had many different kinds of behavior problems but the one selected for assessment and intervention first was extremely disruptive behavior, especially with substitute teachers. Because the function appeared to be to escape being in the classroom with the substitute, the intervention selected was to teach Student 6 that he had an option to politely excuse himself from the classroom if he felt it was necessary when there was a substitute. Arrangements were made in advance for a safe place for the student to go. The plan was practiced with the student and explained to substitutes. In addition, the student was able to earn a "day off" from penmanship if he followed the plan correctly.

Student 12. Student 12 was in Grade 1 when an EA who was assigned to work with him participated in the project. At the same time, it was discovered that the student was diabetic and that it would be necessary to work with the school nurse regarding medical issues. The functional

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assessment included interviews with student, parent, classroom teacher, and school counselor; observations on four different days, and a competing behavior analysis. The different informants did not agree; some said his disruptive and noncompliant behavior functioned to avoid work and others thought it was for attention. The observations suggested that both of those functions were important. A range of possible strategies were considered and four were chosen: (a) change seating, (b) improve teaching of behavioral expectations but go over them with the whole group that the student is in, not just Student 12, (c) teach the student to make eye contact with the teacher more often, and (d) increase the frequency and amount of positive feedback that is given to the student when he behaves appropriately. In addition, in case of a crisis, such as serious disruptive or noncompliant behavior, the school staff decided on a place (e.g., a chair in the back of the room) where the student could go that would be away from his group where he could compose himself and then return to the group. This option was explained to him and rehearsed.

Student 28. Student 28 had been removed from his parents' home and placed in foster care. He had received counseling for anger management. When he was in Grade 3, his teacher participated in the IPS in-service training, seeking help with two behavior problems: (a) physical aggression and (b) "fits" or episodes loud crying. Student 28's discipline referrals were for fighting. The functional assessment indicated that hitting and kicking were predictable responses to provocations from peers (e.g., verbal abuse, shoving, pushing). The crying "fits" seemed to be used primarily to escape difficult academic tasks although also might occur if the student did not get any attention for 15 minutes or more. The interventions selected for these problems built on socially appropriate skills that Student 28 already had learned but was not using frequently or fluently: (a) talking out problems and (b) asking for help from staff to problem solve. The teacher and other adults made an effort to prompt, encourage, and reinforce Student 28 (and other students) for using these skills more often. In addition, the teacher made efforts to (a) reduce the level of verbal abuse, pushing, and shoving that was occurring among all the students and (b) ask Student 28 if he understood instructions or needed extra time for assignments. These interventions were effective in reducing both behavior problems.

Student 19. Student 19 was a first grade student who had not received any discipline referrals in kindergarten or during the first term of first grade. However, in the second half of that school year he was warned often about minor misbehavior on the playground, such as not keeping his hands and feet to himself. He also received a discipline referral for disruptive and defiant behavior in the classroom. In Grade 2, he received a discipline referral for inappropriate language in the cafeteria. This student's teacher, unlike the other teachers and educational assistants discussed above, who were successful in conducting functional assessments and developing related positive interventions that reduced behavior and discipline problems, depended on a brief self-monitoring intervention developed by someone else as her intervention. Although the teacher worked with Student 19 to learn and use the self-monitoring intervention, and it was effective when used, it was not enough to reduce the behavior problems throughout the day and over time. The functional assessment indicated that the student's disruptive behaviors were maintained in part by negative adult attention and also were occurring in part because the student had not learned "school survival" skills (Walker, 1995) nor been sufficiently reinforced for appropriate behavior. It appears that the intervention needs to be expanded or revised.

Although more research is needed, we conclude that functional behavioral assessment can reduce discipline referrals if the teachers and educational assistants who will be

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implementing function-based support are (a) involved in the assessment process and in planning the intervention, and (b) are trained, provided with resources, and supported in their efforts.

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